The Water Museum
by Nisi Shawl

When I saw the hitchhiker standing by the sign for the Water Museum, I knew he had been sent to assassinate me. First off, that's what the dogs were saying as I slowed to pick him up. Girlfriend, with her sharp, little, agitated bark, was quite explicit. Buddy was silently trying to dig a hole under the back seat, seeking refuge in the trunk. I stopped anyway.

Second off, the man as much as told me so his own self. He opened up the passenger door of my midnight-blue '62 Mercury, and piled in with his duffel bag and his jeans and white tee and his curly brown hair tucked under a baseball cap. "Where you goin?" I asked, as soon as he was all settled and the door shut.

"Water Museum," he said. "Got an interview for a job there." That was confirmation, 'cause I wasn't hiring just then. Way too early in the year for that; things don't pick up here till much later in the spring. Even then, my girls and me handle most of whatever work comes up. Even after Albinia, my oldest, took herself off ten years ago, I never hired no more than a couple locals to tide us over the weekends. And this guy wasn't no local. So he was headed where he had no business to be going, and I could think of only the one reason why.

But I played right along. "What part?" I asked him, pulling back out on the smooth one-lane blacktop.

It took him a second to hear my question. "What do you mean, what part? They got different entrances or something?"

"I mean the Water Museum is three, four miles long," I told him. Three point two miles, if you want to be exact, but I didn't. "You tell me where you want to go there, and I'll get you as close as I can."

I twisted around to get a good look at the dogs. Buddy had given up his tunnel to the trunk. He was lying on the floor, panting like a giant, asthmatic, weight-lifter. His harness jingled softly with every whuffling breath. Girlfriend was nowhere in sight.

The hitchhiker twisted in his seat, too. "Nice animal," he said uneasily, taking in Buddy's shiny, tusky-looking teeth. "Sheepdog?"

"Nope. Otterhound. Lotta people make that mistake, though. They do look alike, but otterhound's got a finer bone structure, little different colorin."

"Oh."

We started the long curve down to the shore. I put ‘er in neutral and let us glide, enjoying the early morning light. It dappled my face through the baby beech leaves like butter and honey on a warm biscuit.

On this kind of bright, sunshiny spring morning, I found it hard to credit that a bunch of men I didn’t even know were bent on my destruction. Despite the evidence to the contrary sitting right there next to me on the plaid, woven vinyl seat cushion, it just did not make sense. What were they so het up about? Their lawns? Browned-off golf courses, which shouldn’ta oughta been there in the first place? Ranches dried to dust and blowing away . . . yeah, I could see how it would disturb folks to find the land they thought they owned up and left without ’em. I just did not agree with their particular manner of settling the matter.

I drove quietly with these thoughts of mine awhile, and my killer sat there just as quiet with his. Then we came to that sweet little dip, and the turn under the old viaduct, and we were almost there. “You figured out yet where you’re headed?” I asked.

“Uhh, no, ma’am. Just drop me off by the offices, I guess . . .”

“Offices ain’t gonna be open this early,” I told him. “Not till noon, between Labor Day and Memorial Weekend. C’mon, I got nothin better to do, I’ll give you a tour.”

“Well, uhh, that’s nice, ma’am, but I, uh, but don’t go out of your way or anything . . .”

I looked at him, cocked my chin and grinned my best country-girl grin, the one that makes my cheeks dimple up and my eyelashes flutter. “Why, it’d be a pleasure to show you around the place!” By this time we were to the parking lot. I pulled in and cut the ignition, and before he could speak another word I had opened my door. “Let’s go.”

The hitchhiker hesitated. Buddy whined and lumbered to his feet, and that must have decided him. With what I would call alacrity he sprang out on his side of the car onto the gravel. Ahh, youth.

I let Buddy out the back. Instead of his usual sniff and pee routine, he stuck close to me. Girlfriend was still nowhere in sight. The hitchhiker was looking confusedly around the clearing. At first glance the steps are hard to pick out, and the trail up into the dunes is faint and overgrown.

I grabbed my wool ruana and flung it on over my shoulders, rearranging my neckerchiefs and headscarves. “You got a jacket, young man?” I asked him. “Shirtsleeves’re all right here, but we’re gonna catch us a nice breeze down by the Lake.”

“Um, yeah, in my–” He bent over the front seat and tugged at something on the floor. “In my duffel, but I guess it’s stuck under here or something.”

Came a low, unmistakable growl and he jumped back. I went around to his side. “Don’t worry, I’ll get it out for you,” I said. “Girlfriend!” I bent over and grabbed one green canvas corner of my assassin’s duffel bag and pulled. This is Girlfriend’s favorite game. We tussled away for a few minutes. “She’s small, but she’s fierce,” I commented as I took a quick break. “You got any food in there, a sandwich or somethin?”

“No. Why?”

“I just noticed she had the zipper open some.”

The hitchhiker got a little pale and wispy-looking when he heard that. He stayed that way till I retrieved his duffel and gave it to him to rummage through. He took his time finding his jean jacket, and by the time he’d dug it out and put it on he looked more solid and reassured.

So now I knew where his gun was. Should I let him keep it? He’d be a lot easier to handle without a pistol in his fist. Then again, the thing might not even be loaded, depending on how soon he’d been planning on meeting up with me; simpler for him to explain an empty gun to any cops stopped him hitching rides. And I’d be able to get him relaxed faster if he was armed.

He threw the bag over his shoulder and I locked the car. Girlfriend had already started up the trail. Of course he wanted me to walk ahead of him, but Buddy just looked at him with his dark, suspicious eyes and Mr. Man decided it would be okay if this time he was the one to go first.

I love the dance I chose when I made this path, the wending and winding of the way. As we climbed, we left the beech trees behind and ascended into the realm of grass and cherries, of white-backed poplar leaves, soft as angel fuzz. Poison ivy shone waxily, warningly, colored like rich, red wine.

We walked right past my offices. They look like part of the dune crest, coming at ’em from this side. I cast ’em that way, wound ’em round with roots, bound ’em with stems and sprinkled pebbles lightly over the top. The windows are disguised as burrows, with overhangs and grass growing down like shaggy eyebrows.

My assassin’s Nikes made soft little drumming sounds on the boardwalk, following the click of Girlfriend’s nails round to the blow-out and the observation deck. The promised breeze sprang up, ruffling our fur and hair. I watched my killer’s reaction to his first sight of the Museum.

His shoulders straightened and relaxed, though I hadn't noticed they were crooked before that. He walked up and leaned against the wooden rail. "All that water . . ." he said.

I came up and joined him. "Yes," I said. "All that water." From the deck you can see it, as much as can be seen from down here on the Earth. Shadows still hung beneath us, but further out the Great Lake sparkled splendidly. Waves were dancing playfully, like little girls practicing ballet. They whirled and leapt and tumbled to rest just beyond the short terminal dunes five hundred feet below where we stood. "All that water. And all of it is sweet."

I took my killer gently by the arm and led him to the river side. That's where the work I've done is easiest to take in: the floating bridges over Smallbird Marsh, the tanks and dioramas and such. "Where you from, kid?" We started down the steps.

"Colorado."

"Pretty?"

"It used to be. When I was little, back before the drought got bad."

I stopped at a landing and waited for Buddy to catch up. He's all right on a hillside, but this set of stairs is steep and made out of slats. They give under his weight a bit, and that makes him take them slow and cautious, ears flapping solemnly with every step.

I smiled at my assassin and he smiled shyly back. It occurred to me then that he might not know who I am. I mean, I do present a pretty imposing figure, being a six-six strawberry blonde, and not exactly overweight, but on the fluffy side. I'd say I'm fairly easy to spot from a description. But maybe they hadn't bothered to give him one.

I dropped his arm and motioned him on ahead. "By the by," I called out, once he was well on his way. "I don't believe I caught your name. Mine's Granita. Granita Bone."

He sorta stopped there for a sec and put his hand out, grabbing for a railing I'd never had installed. Well, I thought, at least they told the poor boy that much.

"Jasper Smith," he said, then turned around to see how I took it.

I nodded down at him approvingly. Jasper rang a nice change on Granita, and the Smith part kinda balanced out its oddness. "Pleased to meet you, Jasper." Girlfriend barked up at us from the foot of the stairs. "All right," I shouted down at her, "I'm a-comin, I'm a-comin."

“Sheltie,” I explained to my killer. “Herdin animal. Makes her nervous to see us spread out like this.” By that time Buddy had caught up and passed me. He knew this walk. I followed him down.

At the bottom, I chose the inland path, past pools of iridescent black blooming with bright marsh marigold. Stabilizing cedars gave way to somber hemlock, still adrip with the morning’s dew.

“Water Music,” I told Jasper, just before our first stop.

“I don’t–”

“Hush up, then, and you will.” Even the dogs knew to keep quiet here. It fell constantly, a bit more hesitant than rain. Notes in a spatter, a gentle jingle, a high and solitary ping! ping! ping! Liquid runs and hollow drums grew louder and louder until we reached the clearing and stood still, surrounded.

It was the tank and windmill that drew him first, though there’s nothing so special about them. I went over with him and undid the lock so the blades could catch the morning’s breeze. The tank’s got a capacity of about four hundred gallons; small, but it usually lasts me a day or two.

With the pump going, the pipe up from the river started in to sing. It’s baffled and pierced; totally inefficient, but gorgeous to my ears. From the other pipes and the web of hose overhead, drops of water continued to gather and fall–on glass and shells, in bowls and bottles, overflowing or always empty, on tin and through bamboo, falling, always falling.

Adding to the symphony, Girlfriend lapped up a drink from a tray of lotuses.

“Wow, Granita, this is really, uh, elaborate,” said Jasper when he’d pretty much done looking around.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Yeah, but isn’t it kinda, umm, kinda wasteful?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But like my mama always said, ‘You don’t never know the usefulness of a useless thing.'” Right then I just about washed my hands of good ole Jasper. But he hadn’t even seen any of the other exhibits, so I decided I’d better postpone judgement. My assassins did tend to have a wide stripe of utilitarianism to ’em. At least at first. Couldn’t seem to help it.

Buddy stood where the trail began again, panting and whining and wagging his whole hind end. He was looking forward to the next stop, hoping to catch him a crawdad. The fish factory’s never been one of my favorite features of the place, but Buddy loved it, and it turned out to be a big hit with Jasper, too. He took a long, long look at the half-glazed ponds that

terraced down the dune. Me and some of the girls had fixed up burnt wood signs by the path, explaining the contents of each one, but Jasper had to climb up all the ladders and see for himself. He disappointed me by flashing right past all my pretty koi. Can you believe it was the catfish that caught his fresh little fancy? He must have spent twenty minutes to check out those mean, ugly suckers. Though, to give him his credit, he dallied a fair while with Yertle and that clan, too.

Meanwhile, me and the dogs kept waiting on my killer to make his move.

We looped under the deserted highway and came back by Summer Spring Falls and the Seven Cauldrons, then started across the marsh over the floating bridges, which Buddy doesn't like anymore than the stairs. Maybe it's the way the wicker that I wove 'em from sorta sags, or the dark breezes stirring up between the chinks, or the gaps you have to hop over going from one section to the next.

The breeze picked up again as we headed towards the beach. Small clouds, light on their feet, flickered past the sun.

I let him get behind me. Wicker creaks. I could hear his footsteps hesitate, sinking lower as he stood trying to decide was this the time and place. We were alone, he had a good clean line of sight, nothing but the wind between his aim and my broad back. But when he stilled and I turned, his hand wasn't doing nothing but resting on the zipper of his duffel bag, and that wasn't even open yet. His eyes were focused over my head, far off in space or time. He was listening.

Red-winged blackbirds. Sweet and pure, their songs piped up, trilling away into silence, rising again from that pool of quiet, sure and silver, pouring over and over into my ears. "When I was a boy . . ." said Jasper. I waited. In a moment he started again. "When I was a boy, there was a creek and a swamp, where the river used to be. I didn't know, I thought it was just a fun place to play. Some birds there, they sang just like this."

Well, making allowance for a few inaccuracies (swamp for marsh, and the bird songs had to vary a *little*), this sounded pretty much like his truth. And it made actual sense to me, not like them pipeline dreams of those cowboys sent him here. Now we were getting somewhere. Closer. He'd be making his attack real soon.

I turned back around and trudged a little more slowly along the baskety surface of the bridge. The back of my neck crawled and itched, like itty bitty Jaspers and Granitas were walking all over it. I kept myself in hand, though, breathing deep and regular, balanced on the bubbling well of power beneath my feet, telling myself soon–soon–

He didn’t stop, he just slowed down a hair. I didn’t hear any zipper, either, but when I turned again he had finally pulled his goddamn gun out and it was pointed straight at me. Was it loaded, then? He seemed to think so.

My chest cramped up and my temperature dropped like I’d been dumped head first into Superior. I could wind up contributing my vital nitrogen and phosphorus content to the cycle like right *now*. I let my fright sag me down and grabbed the rails as his eyes hardened and his gun hand tensed. He was a lefty.

With a sudden lurch I threw myself against the side of the bridge and tipped us all into the cool, ripe waters of Smallbird Marsh. The gun cracked off one shot, just before we all made a nice big splash. I shrugged out of my ruana and kicked off my clogs and I knew I’d be okay. Fluff floats. Buddy woofed and Girlfriend yapped, all happy and accounted for.

Girlfriend and I pulled ourselves right up onto the next basket, but the menfolks stayed in a while longer. Buddy loves to swim, and he’s good at it, too. Jasper was floundering, though, wrapped up in weeds and trying to breathe mud. By the time I got him hauled out he wasn’t more than half conscious. Still had a grip on that gun, though. I pried it loose and tossed it back.

Now how to get him back up to the offices? I thought about it while I whipped a few of my scarves around his wrists and elbows and ankles and knees. My sash in a slip knot ’round his throat for good measure. I shoved him till he sat mostly upright. “Ain’t this a fuckin mess?” I asked him, tilting his head so he could see the tipped over basket, then back around to me. “I *just* had my hair done, got the dogs back from the groomer’s *yesterday*, now you pull this stunt! What in the name of every holy thing were you tryin to do?”

“Kill you.” His voice was rough, sort of a wheeze now from coughing up marsh water.

“Well, duhh. Yeah. Question is what you thought that was supposed to accomplish?” He just stuck out his bottom lip. Put me in mind of Albinia, age eight.

“Ain’t I done told your bosses, time and again, gettin rid of me is gonna do ’em not one whit of good? Ain’t I told ’em how it’s the oracle decides whether or not the Water Museum’s ever gonna open up a pipeline and exercise its rights to sell? And if I hadn’t told ’em, ain’t it right there in our charter, a matter of public record for every passin pissant to read it if he remembers his A-B-Cs? Well, ain’t it?”

My killer kinda shrunk his shoulders in. Breeze picked up some, rustling the reeds. I'm pretty well insulated, but Jasper couldn't help a little shiver. That was all I got out of him that while, though.

I left him and walked a couple of baskets to the boathouse for a life jacket. Had to untie his arms to get it on, and he wanted to wrestle then, having dried out enough to get his dander up. I got a hold on his nice new necktie and pulled. Finished bundling him up while he was trying to recall if he still knew how to breathe. I gave us both a chance to calm down, then dumped him back in the marsh.

Good thing I had Buddy's harness on him. I whistled him over, hooked up Jasper's life jacket and we were on our way once more.

"You're in luck," I told my assassin. "Usually we skip this part of the tour, but I noticed you gronkin all the technical dingle-dangles. So I figure you'll get a large charge out of our sewage treatment facilities."

The jacket worked fine. Buddy paddled joyfully along next to the bridges. He likes to make himself useful.

It wasn't far to the settling ponds. I gave Jasper plenty of chances to tell me about Colorado wildlife and the dying riparian ecosystem, but he didn't seem to be in the mood. He was mostly silent, excepting the odd snort when Buddy kicked up too big a wake.

Really, the ponds weren't that bad. Joy, my youngest daughter, got the Museum a contract with a local trailer park, but they're pretty much dormant till early May. Right then, the park was mostly empty, just a few old retirees, so the effluent came mainly from my offices and the tanks of a couple friends.

I glossed over that, though, in my lecture. I concentrated instead on wind-driven aeration paddles, ultra-sound and tank resonance, and oh, yes, our patented, prize-winning, bacteriophagic eels. As the ponds got murkier and murkier, Jasper's gills got greener and greener, so to speak. He held up well. I had dragged him over two locks, and had him belly down on the third when he broke.

"Nonononono!" he gibbered at me. "What is it, what is it, don't let it touch me, please!" I bent over and looked where he was looking. Something was floating in the water. I fished it out. One end of a cucumber had my killer sobbing out his heart and wriggling like a worm with eyes to see the hook.

People are funny.

Girlfriend came up and sniffed the piece of cucumber. It was kind of rotten, and after all, she is a dog. I threw it back to the eels, unhitched Buddy's harness and rolled Jasper over on his back. "You ready to come clean?" I asked him. He nodded desperately.

I wasted quite a few minutes trying to untie the wet silk knotted around his ankles. Then I got disgusted and sawed it through with my car keys. Still left him hobbled at the knees as I marched him off to the laundry room.

We came in through the "Secret Tunnel," what the girls like to call it. Really, it's just a old storm sewer from under the highway. But when I excavated the place and found how close it passed, I annexed the pipe onto my basement there. Handy, sometimes. Grate keeps out most of the possum and nutrias. The big ones, anyways. I locked that into place and set Jasper down on a bench next to the washer, under the skylight.

I nabbed a towel off the steam rack and wrecked it rubbing Buddy down. Took off his poor harness while carefully considering my killer.

He looked a sorrowful mess. His tee shirt was gonna need some enzyme action before you could come anywhere's close to calling it white again, and his jeans and jacket weren't never gonna smell clothesline fresh no more, no matter what. His hat was gone, his hair matted down with algae and such. His eyes were red from crying, his upper lip glistened unbecomingly, and the rest of him steamed in the cool laundry room air.

I prayed for a washday miracle.

"Jasper," I told him, "you are in a terrible spot right now." He nodded a couple times, agreeable as any schoolchild. "Sometimes, the only way outta danger is in. You gotta go through it to get to the other side. You gotta sink to swim.

"I'm tellin you honest and true that in spite of what went on out there I bear you absolutely no grudges. You believe me?" Again the nod. "Good. Try and bear it in mind over the next few days."

I reached my shears down from the shelf above his head and cut away the rest of where I'd tied him up: hands first, elbows next, then knees. Those were some nice scarves, too. One my favorite. I was sure hoping he'd be worth it.

"Strip," I told him. He only hung back a second, then he put off his modesty or pride or whatever, and the rest of his wet, useless things right after. Girlfriend tried to run off with a sock but I made her bring it back. "Dump that shit in the washer." I had him set it to low, hot wash, cold rinse, add my

powder, and switch on. He didn’t seem to know his way around the control panel, and I wondered who’d been taking care of him back home.

Pale goose pimples ain’t exactly my cup of vodka, but Jasper was a nice enough looking young man. Given the circumstances. I admired his bumptious little backside as I scooted him on ahead of me over to the Sunshower. Light shafted down through the glass, glittering off the walls of black sand that lined its path for all of two hundred and fifty feet. It was midday by then, and the water pretty warm. He stayed under there a good, long while. I could tell he was finished when he started to look for a way to turn it off. Weren’t none, of course. It ain’t my job to tell the water when to stop, only to help it through the flow. And naturally, any little deviations I do participate in ain’t nothing like what them so called “Water Interest” cowboys got in mind.

“Leave it, Jasper,” I told him, motioning him on with my shears. Girlfriend gruffed a little bit to underline the suggestion. We took him along the hall past the Glowing Pool and the steps down to the Well. Later, on his way out, I planned on stopping to offer him a sweet, cold dipperful. Like drinking a cup of stars.

Gradually, the way we walked kept getting darker, the skylights scarcer and more spaced out. Joy and Gerrietta’s mosaics running up and down the walls barely glittered by the time we hit the Slipstream, and I heard Jasper gasp as he stepped into swiftly moving water. “Keep goin,” I told him, and he sloshed obediently on ahead. The dogs were between us, now.

Somewhere close by came the sound of icebergs calving, the underwater songs of whales. I barely heard them as I fumed to myself, wondering if I loaded up a fleet of helicopters to drop off leaflets and trained a flock of condors to fly across the whole United States with a banner in their beaks, if I could make them idiots realize they were not gonna get their Great Lakes pipeline open by killing me off.

Maybe the first few assassins were just to put a touch of fear on me. Maybe they thought the oracle wasn’t nothing but a sham, and I could be bullied into letting them use the Museum’s exclusive access.

For a while there, looked like they really did want to kill me. With my oldest girl, Albinia, off in the wild blue yonder, there’d be a bit of a legal tussle over the Directorship. Guess they might of planned to take advantage of the confusion ensuing upon my untimely demise.

Lately, most of their moves they seemed to make just purely to annoy me. Sending out an amateur like this here Jasper–

Up ahead, the sloshing stopped. My killer stood waiting for us on the ledge, in the dark.

“Here’s where you’ll be stayin.” I opened the door to the Dressing Room. He didn’t seem much taken with the place. Sure, the ceiling’s kind of low, ‘cept for that two hundred foot skylight. And you got to sleep on the floor or in the sandpit. But that sand is soft, and nice and warm on account of the solar heat-exchanger underneath. “I’ll give you a little while in here by yourself to figure out what you’re gonna be when you come out. Say, a week maybe. Then I’ll come back and you can tell me what you’ll be needin.”

“But–food, water!”

“They’re here.” He looked around at the bare driftwood walls. “You doubtin my word? You’re a bright boy, Jasper, I’m sure you’ll find where they’re at in plenty time.”

“I don’t understand. You’re not trying to torture me are you? I mean, if you want a confession I’ve already–”

“You don’t understand? Then let me explain. I don’t need a confession. I got that the first time them cowboys sent someone up here to murder me, fourteen years agone. That’s right, Jasper, you are by no means the first hired killer I met up with, though you have got to be the most naive by a crane’s holler. *Hitchhikin* to the *hit*? Talk about your sore thumbs!”

Jasper turned red from the collarbone up. “My van broke down in Bliss.”

“Yeah, well, guess you couldn’t afford a rental, and probably just as conspicuous to get one of them, anyways. But you coulda just given up. Couldn’t you?”

That’s when my killer started in again about the blackbirds, and added a sheep farm and I don’t know what all else. It wasn’t the sense of his words I paid attention to: none of them ever had much worth listening to to say at this point. The Earth owed them a living, and a silver teat to suck. And it better be a mighty long dug, ’cause it wasn’t supposed to dry up, no matter how hard them cowboys chewed.

They all seemed to need to give their little speeches, though, so I had got used to sitting politely and listening to the kinds of sounds they made. Rattles and grates and angry, poisonous buzzings was what they usually come up with.

Jasper surprised me with an awful good imitation of a red-winged blackbird. Lower register, of course. But his voice trilled up and spilled over the same

way, throbbing sweet and pure, straight from his poor little heart. A pretty song, but he was singing it to the wrong audience.

Once, I was one of the richest women on this continent. Powerball winnings. I took and built the Water Museum, then finessed an old congressman of a lover of mine into pushing through our charter. He secured us the sole, exclusive rights to be selling off the Great Lakes' water to irrigate them thirsty Western states.

Or not.

Didn't them cowboys kick up a dust storm! Kept us real busy for a while there, in the courts and on the talkiest of the talk shows.

I'm not rich no more. What I didn't use building the Museum or fighting to protect our charter, I wound up giving us as a donation. Not so famous no more, neither. And important? Not in the least.

During the season, I sell tickets and polish windows, hand out sea-weed candy to unsuspecting kids. Nothing but that would stop because I died, much less if I changed my feeble mind.

I sighed. Jasper had finished his aria, and I prepared to shut the door. Then, shears still held tight, and Buddy close and attentive at hand, I did the funniest thing. I kissed him, right on his damp, still-kinda-smelly forehead. He looked up at me, and he done something funny, too. He smiled. I smiled again, but neither of us said a thing. I backed out, still careful, and locked him in. I have a sneaky suspicion this one *might* turn out to be interesting. When he's good and ready.